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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DOHA 001745

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STATE FOR NEA/PD, NEA/ARP  
INFO NSC FOR ABRAMS, DOD/OSD FOR SCHENKER AND MATHENY  
LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA OFFICE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/30/2011  
TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [QA](#) [ALJAZEERA](#)  
SUBJECT: AL JAZEERA QUALITY ASSURANCE CHIEF BELIEVES  
PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE

REF: A. 05 DOHA 1786  
[1](#)B. DOHA 312

Classified By: Ambassador Chase Untermeyer, reasons 1.4 (b&d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: PAO met December 14 with Al Jazeera Quality Assurance Chief, Jaafar Abbas Ahmed, to review progress made by the Quality Assurance (QA) Unit in his assessment since Ref A report in October 2005. In the intervening period, Abbas was named head of QA for the overall Al Jazeera Network, which includes Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA) and Al Jazeera English (AJE) among others. According to Abbas, AJE's performance is proving to be "an eye-opener" to AJA staff, and he foresees considerable mutual benefit accruing to the two channels from their proximity to each other. Abbas feels considerable progress has been made in establishing the credibility of the QA unit, which is now regarded by AJ staff with "a mixture of hostility and respect," whereas initially (Ref A), the unit was regarded "with open hostility." The QA Unit is undergoing expansion and hopes to undertake more sophisticated content analysis in the coming months. End summary.

QA for the Network  
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[1](#)2. (C) Initially established in 2004 to monitor news and program quality -- specifically accuracy and bias -- at AJA, the QA Unit's mandate has now been extended to cover the entire Al Jazeera Network (established in March 2006, Ref B), which includes Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA), Al Jazeera English (AJE), the two websites, Al Jazeera Direct (cf C-Span) and the soon to be launched Al Jazeera Documentary (cf the Discovery Channel). According to Abbas, the decision to name him to the Network was taken by AJN Director-General Wadah Khanfar, in order to ensure uniform standards of quality across the network. Abbas, who drafted the AJ Codes of Ethics and Conducts implemented at AJA eighteen months ago, has re-issued the two Codes for adoption by all AJ entities after a current period of open comment from all staff. Although the Codes cover all standard international journalism concepts (honesty, fairness, objectivity, independence, dealing with sources etc), the original AJA codes were written specifically for an Arabic channel and needed to be revamped to cover the new overall AJ reality, Abbas said.

[1](#)3. (C) Abbas said that in his opinion the November 15 launch of AJE has proved in many ways to be "an eye-opener" for many of the Arabic staff, particularly with regard to coverage of Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim issues. The AJE staff tend to be mainly "from established democracies" and "balance comes to

them so naturally. It is second nature to them to tell the other side of the story," he said, adding that the AJE journalists' attitude of "positive neutrality" is a new element for most of the Arab journalists (whether raised in "Republics of Fear" and used to either toeing the official line in previous jobs, or used to not being able to express their own opinions freely, or used to unthinking emotional bias with regard to Arab issues). While AJE brings this benefit to AJA, AJA in its turn is able to inform and support AJE with its expertise and background on Middle Eastern/Arab affairs, he said.

QA Unit now "respected"

14. (C) PAO recalled that during their last conversation (Ref A), Abbas had noted that the QA Unit was regarded with "open hostility" by Al Jazeera journalists, and asked whether that situation had changed. Abbas said the QA Unit has steadily gained in credibility and is now regarded with "a mixture of respect and hostility." The QA Unit produces a daily report on all the news bulletins, which is discussed by mandate at the daily 1pm editorial meeting, he said. The QA Unit also produces focused sustained reports on a single individual - whether a correspondent in the field or a presenter in the studio - which is used to provide counseling where necessary. Fully backed by AJN DG Wadah Khanfar, the QA Unit has been given some administrative teeth, he said -- some journalists have lost their jobs over repeated deliberate violations of the Code of Conduct, and the QA Unit now has input into the performance review that decides the annual salary increments the AJ staff receive. "No journalist now dares to be openly biased in script," he said, which had not been the case a year ago. Occasionally a reporter in the field will make

DOHA 00001745 002 OF 003

comments showing bias during unscripted post-report interviews with anchors, he said. Sometimes this is because a reporter may be weak at ad-libbing; sometimes established verbal patterns take over; sometimes the bias is deliberate. In all cases, the reporter is called to task and the slip documented, said Abbas.

15. (C) The QA Unit, formerly located in separate premises in a different part of town, is now located on the Al Jazeera compound, with QA Unit staff offices actually inside the Al Jazeera newsroom. Abbas said this co-location has contributed to the reduction in hostility between AJ staff and the QA Unit. The ability to discuss and resolve issues in person at the time they arise has been a positive factor, he said.

QA Unit to add 6 new employees

16. (C) Abbas said he is currently interviewing for six new staff members, to add to the current 7-member QA Unit. This is partly to identify some native English speakers with good Arabic to take on the task of monitoring AJE, but Abbas also said he wants to take the QA Unit in the direction of content analysis. Now that the more overt forms of bias are much less of a problem, Abbas said he is interested in looking at the "more subtle forms of bias." For example, the ratio of coverage of some issues compared to others in overall programming; the number of times certain guests appear; the types of guests that appear, and so forth. Abbas says that by tracking such concepts "we will eradicate a lot of undetectable bias."

The big name shows are still no-go areas

17. (C) Abbas said there are "some shows" he no longer monitors -- mentioning specifically Faisal Al Qasim's "The Opposite Direction" (a heated Cross Talk-type show); Sammy

Haddad's "More Than One Opinion" (a discussion show) and Ahmed Mansour's "Without Limits" (a one-on-one interview show). On Al Qasim he said ("off the record") that in his view the show should be "wiped off the air" -- Al Qasim has run out of steam, no longer has anything to add to the general discourse. He started out discussing significant issues such as reform and democracy, but "last week he had a show on plastic surgery!" No self-respecting intellectual will appear on Al Qasim's show, said Abbas. Regarding Mansour, he said Mansour is a "good journalist, researches his topics and prepares very well. It's not for me to say why he is rude to some of his guests and overly polite to others," said Abbas. (Note: A Cairo-based Egyptian, Mansour is known for favoring "Islamist" pro-Muslim Brotherhood guests on his show. These three names are among Al Jazeera's most senior and most prominent and well-established personalities. PAO inferred from Abbas's words and demeanor that he had likely clashed with them at some point, come off worst in the encounter and declined to give further input where it was ignored. Although his claims of having gained respect and influence over the rank and file of AJ's journalistic staff seem credible clearly he still has some way to go when it comes to such AJ seasoned heavy-hitters as Haddad, Al Qasim and Mansour. End note.)

#### In-house political education series

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18. (C) Abbas said he is in charge of organizing a monthly lecture series on "political education", which aims at giving the AJ journalistic staff theoretical background in "concepts, ideas and schools of thought." he said. The most recent lecture was on Shi'ism. Other lecturers have included a representative of Hezbollah and one from the Tunisian "Renaissance" party, he said. PAO noted that the Embassy would be pleased to organize a talk for this series by Embassy Doha's visiting Fulbright professor, a University of Massachusetts professor currently teaching an international affairs program at Qatar University. Abbas welcomed the idea and we will pursue it.

Comment

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DOHA 00001745 003 OF 003

19. (C) A seasoned and committed journalist, Abbas made it clear he feels his unit has made significant progress in greatly reducing basic journalistic problems relating to accuracy and bias. This he sees as largely due to the high-level AJ support the QA mandate enjoys and the administrative teeth it has been permitted to develop, with an unexpected boost provided by the living example of the more seasoned and sophisticated AJE phenomenon next door. His vision is now focused on providing more in-depth "content analysis" requiring a more sophisticated and broader approach to the overall news day. AJ appears to have been forthcoming with the budgetary support he needs to implement this vision. Post will continue to report on his efforts.

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